

My life in Shatila: World History in 1 square kilometer

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Looking out the barred window of my home in Shatila Refugee Camp, Beirut, I can't help but reflect on the reality that I have come so used to - the reality of being a Syrian teenager in a Palestinian controlled camp in a Lebanese controlled city. Shatila – a place that collects people of all nationalities who have nowhere else to go, that carries the scars of every person that has the misfortune to enter it – the place that has become my home. Having lived here for so long, I have found my own identity increasingly tied up in its social order (where the Lebanese control the Palestinians who control the Syrians who control everyone else) and moving away from my Syrian nationality.

World history, for me then, is my own history, since my life here is inextricable from its whims; I cannot conceptualise my own identity, make sense of my reality, without understanding the history of Palestine, of Lebanon, of Palestinians in Lebanon, and even of Europe, America, the West – who's hands have shaped that history. In studying World History, I have come to see Shatila as a microcosm of The Middle East, which in turn can be understood only in its contextualization at a crossroads of global interests, a ship being tossed around by the waves of the world. I understood the life I see outside my window, of my day-to-day realities through this journey of discovery.

After the displacement of Palestinians in 1948, Shatila's story began in 1949. After that moment a permanent home for thousands of Palestinians, Lebanese during the civil war, and later Syrians fleeing war, like my own family, was established, which was intended to be a temporary refuge. It was initially established as a temporary refuge, but over the years, it became a permanent home for thousands of refugees—Palestinians, Lebanese during the civil war, and later Syrians fleeing war, like my own family. Every street and corner in Shatila holds pieces of these histories. It's not just a camp—it's a place with an outstanding mixture of stories caused by history.

It reminds me that my past was planned by history as well as my present, as a part of Middle Eastern experience.

Growing up in the camp, illiterate and from an illiterate family, I never understood why displacement was such a persistent theme in our lives, the connecting force that brought everyone in our neighborhood together but didn't seem to affect the rest of the world. When I started learning history at school, I realized that it was The Middle East's role as crossroads of civilizations and a strategic interest for global powers that has lead to this displacement. The product of this fact is the name "The Middle East".

Geographically, the region connects continents, cultures, and trade routes. That made it valuable—and vulnerable. From the ancient empires to the modern superpowers, everyone wanted a piece of the Middle East. This global interest continues today in the form of political alliances, military interventions, and economic exploitation. In many ways, the small camp I call home is a direct result of these forces. Shatila didn't just happen—it was shaped by history.

As I studied world history, I started seeing patterns that connected my life to distant events and decisions. Colonialism, for instance, changed the face of the region. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France divided up the Middle East with little regard for its people. They drew artificial borders and installed systems that served their own interests. Shatila, like many other places in the region, is a product of these international rivalries; such actions planted seeds of tension and division. The Cold War only made things worse, as global powers used the Middle East as a chessboard to spread their ideologies and gain control over oil and military power. It has been directly affected by these decisions made far away.

This global context helped me understand something deeper: my life in Shatila is not isolated from the world. It is the result of a chain of historical events that cross continents. Before studying history, I thought the war that forced my family to flee Syria was just a local issue. But now I know it was influenced by regional struggles and global interests. The conflict in Syria reflects the same pattern seen in other parts of the Middle East when foreign powers support different sides to international silence or interference. This realization allowed me to understand that people in Shatila are not just victims of circumstance—they are connected to a bigger global history that repeats itself.

The more I studied, the more I began to understand my own identity in a new way. I no longer saw myself as just Wissal, a Syrian refugee living in Shatila. I started seeing myself as part of a much older story—a story of people constantly adapting to change, resisting control, and surviving against the odds. The history of the Middle East is full of

migrations, occupations, revolutions, and resilience. That history lives inside me. I carry it in my memories, my accent, and even in my dreams of a better future.

Shatila has helped shape this understanding. Living there, I have seen firsthand how people from different backgrounds and generations come together to survive. I have met Palestinian elders who still remember their homeland, Lebanese families who lost everything during war, and Syrian children who are trying to rebuild their lives. Each of us has a different past, but we are united by displacement and hope. Shatila showed me that our struggles are not only personal—they are historical. The pain we feel is not new. Millions were affected as part of a cycle across time.

Images of war and instability portrayed the Middle East. But what is often missing from these images is the global context—the role of foreign powers, economic interests, and political interference. The truth is, the region has never been disconnected from the world. Whether during the Crusades, the era of colonization, or the current geopolitical tensions, global forces have always had a hand in shaping its fate. That's why the history of the Middle East can't be separated from world history. And Shatila, as small as it is, reflects this reality.

As I look forward to my future, I carry these lessons with me. History is not something distant or written only in books. It is alive in the places we live and the choices we make. Shatila taught me resilience, but history taught me why resilience was necessary. I now know that my identity is not limited to one camp or one country. It stretches across borders and connects with the lives of others around the world.

Shatila is living proof that there is no point in studying a history defined by borders. Like my life, like Shatila, history is itself borderless. There is no event in one country that doesn't have a ripple effect, whether the next day or across multiple generations and societies, and any one person or event can only be understood in the context of these ripples.